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## 'Cognitive Dissonance' vs. Sound Cognition

Suppose that I announce that it has been disclosed to me in a vision that floods will cover the earth on July 31, 1984, but that those who give up all and rally to my side may well be saved. Suppose further that on July 31 I ascend a mountain peak with my followers and there, bursting with prayer and beset by reporters, await the midnight hour of doom for all save me and mine. What happens when midnight comes and goes without disaster? The chances are that I and my disciples will find the event as somehow confirmatory of our beliefs and will continue to proselytize with

### Viewpoint

by Alexander Cockburn

greater gusto than ever. The alternative would be to admit that the scoffers had a point after all.

The sociologists who described this particular pattern of self-hallucinating mental gymnastics—they called it "cognitive dissonance"—in a book called "When Prophecy Fails," published in the mid-1950s, confined their examination to one tiny cult, most of whose members were finally restored to reason by the incredulity of the outside world and particularly the cynical attentions of the press.

But suppose that in the promulgation of a delusion important elements in the press were willing actors, eager proselytes for a doctrine that turned out to be baseless? *Quis, as the saying goes, custodiet ipsos custodes?*

Round about 1974 the long climb down from detente began. The prophets hoisted signs to the general effect that the Soviet slave state, populated exclusively by drunkards, dissidents and mass murderers, was bent upon world domination, with its forward legions chafing to plunge deep into Western Europe. The barrage increased in intensity as the decade pro-

gressed, just as one might have expected as the prophets neared triumph. Triumph in this case meant the conclusive end of detente, the destruction of arms control and a great leap upward in U.S. military spending.

Alarmism about the Soviet Union's intentions is reasonable enough, for without such alarmism military spending—the main source of vigor in the U.S. economy—would decline and with it the fortunes of the nation. But as always in such spasms of rational propaganda, the irrational increasingly obtruded as the prophets went about their business of delineating the Soviet Union as the empire of evil, devoid of all elements of humanity or reason.

One important element in this irrationality stemmed from the very vehemence of the attack on the Soviet system. If this system had engendered a falling birthrate, a nation of drunks, an expiring economy drained of initiative (and even, in one phase of the barrage, oil), then how had such a system managed to sponsor such vibrant health in its supposedly dominant sector of defense? If the Soviet system was barely held down by the creakingly aged despots in the Kremlin, then why would these despots be contemplating so rash an initiative as the invasion of Western Europe?

After a brief spell of cognitive dissonance, the prophets came back with the "cornered bear" theory. This proposed that Boris the Bear, politically and economically bankrupt, would at the last extremity spring from history's cul-de-sac and drag the world down with him in an orgy of mutual destruction. Leaving aside questions about the true state of the Soviet economy, or of the corruption of the social structure, cursory study of Russian history suggests this to be highly unlikely.

As the propaganda barrage moved into its final stages, the press began to sponsor on an individual basis illustrations of the utter swinishness and evil of the Soviets. To take two well-known examples, the "yellow rain" theory was particularly espoused by The Wall Street Journal editorial page and by ABC television, and the KGB-Bulgarian Pope Plot theory was accorded the enthusiastic support of NBC (and Marvin Kalb), the Reader's Digest and of course Claire Sterling. The WSJ editorial page was, unsurprisingly, also hospitable to Ms. Sterling's propositions. Since there has been much talk this year of journalistic ethics and news-gathering practices, I should emphasize that journalism in both these cases moved well beyond "reporting" into "advocacy." The line between the two is a lot vaguer than many might suppose, but in this case it was clearly crossed.

And there was no mystery about what lay behind the advocacy. Indeed, the advocates stated it explicitly. If the Soviets' complicity in the dropping of "yellow rain" could be demonstrated, then it was clearly futile and dangerous for the U.S. to discuss or sign treaties with such an outlaw state. The Pope Plot compounded this view. A state that attempts to engineer the assassination of the holy father is beyond the bound of civilized discourse.

Thus we have the reputations of powerful news media (and the reputations of prominent journalists) intimately tied up with the validity or otherwise of two hotly contested propositions. What happens if prophecy fails, and if the propositions turn out to be false?

I'm sure that with that breadth of mind for which they are justly famous, the editors of these pages would concede that their theories about "yellow rain" have not been immune to challenge and that serious objections have been raised by scientists and technicians who could scarcely be regarded as the agents of a Soviet disinformation campaign. Yet cognitive dissonance seems to have come into play. Amid all the controversy over "yellow rain," the WSJ published a lengthy series about Soviet genetic engineering, supposedly for the production of biological weapons, blandly entitled "Beyond Yellow Rain." The series was largely based on interviews with emigres who had not seen the inside of a Soviet lab in five years or more, drew sweeping conclusions from mostly circumstantial evidence and, finally, stipulated that though the U.S. is incontestably doing exactly this sort of work, its work is "good" and the Soviet work "bad." Thus have the difficulties with the original "Yellow Rain" been effortlessly transcended.

The Pope Plot has reached such a pitch that the New York Times, purportedly a disinterested journal of record, published the Italian prosecutor's indictment across two pages of its news columns, below the signature of . . . Claire Sterling! (One of its own correspondents had, earlier, filed some deprecating investigations of the "plot.")

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